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ABSTRACT

This article describes the creation, administration, and services of an urban community college women's center. Information is provided on the center's advisory board charged with broadening the base of support, advising on policy formation, long-term planning, and program development. Strategies utilized to promote the center (e.g., publications, public bulletin boards, Web-based programs, community newspaper advertisements, and press releases of major events) are described. The roles of collaboration and student surveys as sources of programming ideas are presented, along with programming initiatives implemented in order to address campus concerns with recruitment and retention. These programs include math anxiety workshops, weekly tutorials, and a reading group that utilizes stories emphasizing race, gender, and ethnicity. Information is also presented concerning the center's evaluation plan, factors that have contributed to the center's success (e.g., Advisory Board and student surveys), a summary of lessons learned, and a description of the outreach services provided by the center, which resulted in a 25% increase in participation between the 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 academic years. (RC)

T. O'Brien

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Revitalizing an Urban Community College Women's Resource Center Kingsborough Community College – The City University of New York

A number of years ago when women were asked a very direct question - "Do you consider yourself a feminist?" - the response was loud and clear from females of all ages and persuasions: Most admitted they were not comfortable with the label of feminist, although they did agree with many tenets of the women's movement, which included equal wages for equal work, freedom of reproductive choice, and a cessation of violence against women. Many students at Kingsborough Community College matched the national profile and did not openly support, or care about, a campus women's resource center that would promote the fundamental principles of fairness and equality on which the women's movement is based.

Despite this apparent lack of interest, the Women's Resource Center (WRC) at Kingsborough Community College (KCC) opened its doors in 1990 and served the small group of students who viewed it as a positive resource. The rest of the campus population, both students and faculty, were either suspect of the venture or unaware of its existence. In its early years, the Center sponsored programs of untested student interest and offered minimal outreach activities on campus. At the time, Women's Centers throughout the City Universities of New York (CUNY) System were closing, funding was drying up, and directorships were being maintained by volunteers. Nationally, issues such as affirmative action and sexual harassment were being decided by the courts; locally, the Women's Resource Center at KCC had little hope of being perceived as a vital support service.

students as well, have shown their support of WRC programs and regularly use its facilities.

A longitudinal comparison of academic year 2000/2001 with 2001/2002 indicates that participation at the WRC has increased 25 percent because of the expanded visibility of the Center and workshops that address student interests. Through revitalization efforts, the WRC staff has made a direct impact on student retention by providing college services and connections to community resources. For example, safety is a critical issue for some students, and 35 of these students remained at KCC after WRC staff provided support services related to their safety. In some cases these services included securing court orders for protection, allowing threatened students to remain in school in relative safety. In addition, WRC support groups are working with about 50 percent more female students this year than they did last year, and thus far, 10 students have passed the CUNY skills assessment exams.

Like most community colleges, KCC is an open admissions institution, and recruitment is often hard to track in relation to services. However, through new promotion strategies at local high schools, WRC staff are raising awareness of college services and expanding the visibility of the Center. In some cases, students are selecting KCC because of the supportive environment of the Women's Resource Center, choosing Kingsborough over closer facilities or other workforce training options.

As community colleges develop programs to meet the needs of a diverse female population, they can benefit from the experiences of others. At KCC, we have exchanged ideas and strategies with women's resource centers on other campuses, and we are pleased to have successful programs to share with others. Our vision for the future of the Kingsborough WRC is one of vitality and strength, and we look forward to increasing opportunities for women students as we pursue that vision. The Center's success is evidenced not only by the numbers of students

The KCC population was, and still is, diverse; the majority of female students are 18- to 22-year-old minority students enrolled in career academic programs. Students knew little about feminism, which they saw as a source of fear and confusion that was considered irrelevant at best. Rather than lament the demise of women's resource centers, we at KCC chose to interpret seeming disinterest as, instead, a lack of information. We took on the challenging task of revitalizing this support service and educating the college and community about women's issues.

REDEFINING OUR MISSION

First, the WRC staff agreed that if the Center was to play an active and vital role on campus, we had to plan for direct, focused services. A concerted effort was made to engage all students in our programming and to provide a user-friendly facility. To establish context, Center staff engaged in brainstorming sessions, realistically evaluated the current student population, and decided that the Center could best meet student needs by helping shape their personal, academic, and professional lives. In addition, WRC faculty, as educators, recognized the importance of helping students appreciate what it means to be female and of supplying students with a set of strategies to help them achieve their goals and dreams.

The broad issue and great struggle involved determining how to achieve the Center's goal to reach out to women from diverse groups, link them together, and unite them around supporting common goals. Most KCC students were not organized around any major issues, and although students often maintained membership in many organizations, they rarely committed real time or energy to them. These factors made recruitment for the Center difficult, so we developed a plan to join female students in new alliances that would develop a broader framework, diminish apathy, and create awareness of their common issues.

To assist in achieving the Center's goals, the staff created an Advisory Board representing KCC students, staff, faculty, and community members. The Advisory Board's general responsibilities include broadening the base of support for the WRC and advising on policy formation, long-term planning, and program development. Particularly, the Advisory Board helps create targeted support services for KCC students. The Advisory Board is designed not only to promote the Center, but also to benefit from a well-established myriad of community resources. An additional objective in the creation of the Advisory Board included the development of college and community connections that would allow cross-departmental resource exchange and the expansion of traditional administrative boundaries. Through these formal developments, the college now views the WRC as a support service actively connecting a variety of programs and resources for students.

The creation of the Advisory Board also fostered a growing awareness of economic and political issues. As part of a public institution, the Center recognizes the importance of economic and political considerations relevant to city, state, and national issues. Although the mission and goals of the WRC are service to students on campus, the Advisory Board reaffirms a commitment to community development and helps achieve the essential goals of inclusion, outreach, promotion of change, and the creation of coalitions.

The diversity among members of the WRC Advisory Board also emphasizes a commitment to student development. The Board includes professionals from KCC's Office of Administration and Planning, Women's Studies Program, College Opportunity for Employment Program, and Office of Student Life. Underscoring a commitment to community service, the WRC Board also includes hospital administrators, elected officials, and members of the New York City Police Department.

CONNECTING WOMEN AT THE COLLEGE

Like many community colleges, Kingsborough has an ethnically diverse population representing countries from around the world. Distance and personal circumstance cause many students to feel out of place and isolated from their cultures and families. The Center viewed this reality as an opportunity to ease the transition to higher education by introducing students to goals and themes they share. Information collected through surveys, discussions, and observation indicated that female student goals included becoming successful and improving their quality of life. WRC staff used these common goals to help connect students and resources to the college. The Center's early, limited programming was expanded to include services to disabled women, minorities, and lesbians. Although members of these groups share issues and concerns common to all women, they also deal with particular issues and concerns that are specific to their life situations. WRC staff realized that if the Center hoped to be of service to a fully representative group of women consideration of specific issues was an important factor.

FRAMING OUR IDENTITY

When, after 10 years, most of the KCC population was unaware of the Center's existence, WRC staff decided to establish a high profile for the facility and its programs. Working with the college's public relations office, we publicized the Center by developing an image-conscious brochure and bookmark. Recognizing that many KCC students are commuters who don't have the time to visit offices, sit through program presentations, and take advantage of many campus-based support services, Center staff decided to reach students through college and community newspapers, public bulletin boards, and web-based programs. We asked the KCC Office of

Public Relations to issue local press releases about major WRC events, and many area newspapers sent reporters to interview and promote WRC guest speakers.

In addition to innovative promotion and media presentations, the Center surveyed students to capture their needs and interests related to program development. Collaborative efforts with the Office of Health Services as well as the Women's Studies Program and other college academic departments resulted in WRC services and programming becoming more reflective of the needs of KCC students and staff. New program topics and developments include workshops on stress reduction, nutrition, health, and fitness. In addition, some of the more compelling new program developments reflect student concerns about domestic violence, security, and safety.

In response to these surveys, workshops were planned involving domestic violence and self-defense. A three-day program, The Clothesline Project, exhibited T-shirts depicting violence in women's lives. Community organizations and agencies displayed informational materials and arranged for representatives to talk with students. This activity expanded to include weekly support groups for female students; the groups are facilitated by professionals from the college's counseling center. Other workshops provide students with information on stress, self-esteem, and personal health issues. The Center also offers crisis counseling, often with walk-ins or referrals. Students having problems with domestic situations, abusive relationships, finances, and child care often require help with immediate survival needs before they can turn their attention to academic endeavors. Newly developed programming efforts at the Center regularly address these and other tough issues.

TARGETING RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

In 1999, a new President, Vice President, and Dean of Students formed an administration ready to tackle the two major problems that beset the campus: recruitment and retention. The WRC staff quickly involved the Center in addressing these issues and offering programs that supported both areas of concern. The Center surveyed students to determine what programs would positively contribute to the issues of recruitment and retention, and female students clearly voiced concerns with academic performance and personal safety.

One issue that surfaced was the high failure rate of KCC students on the CUNY Skills Assessment Tests, baseline competency tests that are a major source of frustration and despair for KCC students. The survey results indicated that a majority of entering students dropped out by the second semester and felt unprepared for the academic demands of college-level work. To assist with student success and retention, WRC staff invited a math instructor to facilitate a scheduled workshop on math anxiety and organize group tutoring sessions. The WRC also began sponsoring workshops focused on English skills and facilitating weekly reading groups that use stories emphasizing race, gender, and ethnicity. Courses and workshops in study skills and test preparation are a formal part of peer-support agendas and are in great demand by KCC students.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

Recognizing a need to demonstrate the success of the Center to the college and the community, the WRC developed an evaluation plan to assess the effectiveness of the Center and its programs. The Women's Resource Center evaluation plan began by defining broad concepts of assessment that would allow for many different areas of consideration. The main mission of the WRC is to provide programming, information, and referral services to KCC students and

staff. Focused on these clear objectives, five areas of evaluation were identified as measures of success:

(1) Quality of Programming--What did we offer the College and what was the quality of the content? Did we achieve a good balance of learning activities, e.g. interactive workshops, lectures, and various media resources? Most importantly, how did our audiences react to these programs?

(2) Suitability--Did our programs meet the needs and the expectations of the college community? Did we touch upon appropriate issues? Were the students able to understand and benefit from the information offered?

(3) Effectiveness--Did the programming accomplish its objectives? How effective was it in reaching the targeted population?

(4) Efficiency--Were we satisfied with the overall accomplishments considering the limitations of time and budget? Was this the best use of our resources to reach the greatest numbers of participants?

(5) Importance--How important was the Women's Resource Center to the college community? How valuable are our resources, i.e. library, support groups, programming, and information and referral services?

Overall, these measures of success and qualifying questions, along with the targeted efforts of student exit surveys, offer planning strategies for the use of limited college resources and the best WRC programming opportunities.

SUMMARY & RESULTS

The results achieved by the Women's Resource Center in a short time are a sign of the

vitality and dedication of the director, staff, and very supportive administrators and faculty. The WRC is considered one of the more successful support services on the Kingsborough campus. As a resource, it has earned the respect of many administrators, faculty, and students for its ability to use its limited funding to produce high-quality, well-attended events.

Factors Contributing to Success

The Center has not only survived for 12 years, but, within the last few years, it has flourished, and a variety of factors contribute to its success. Although the goals and context of the Center are specific to KCC and to the Center itself, many of the elements that have contributed to our success could be easily replicated in other settings. For example, our staff is composed of paid personnel, volunteers, work-study students, and faculty, and we offer a sense of community to those who visit the Center. We continually provide programs that present women's issues within an honest and unbiased setting. The goal for any Women's Resource Center would be to accomplish this balance, taking into consideration the many voices within the college and the community.

The development of the Advisory Board is another factor contributing to the Center's success. The Advisory Board and Center staff efforts toward community collaboration resulted in immediate community connections for WRC participants. The local hospital joined the WRC in a full-day health fair for college staff and students, and offered information booths on low-cost student health insurance. Through Advisory Board membership, the local police precinct advise interested KCC students on internships and volunteer programs in community affairs and public service. The positive Advisory Board connections, activities, and services have made the Women's Resource Center part of the college infrastructure rather than a fringe organization.

Through continuous student survey and program development, the workshops and

presentations focus on broad topics that meet the needs of the students we serve. At the Women of Achievement Awards Ceremony held each May, the WRC honors four to five women from various areas and backgrounds (e.g., education, creative arts, government, sports, women's health). Recipients are role models for KCC students, and at a reception following the ceremony, students and staff socialize and make connections against a background focused on women's issues. Through the years, KCC has honored such esteemed women as Betty Friedan and Dr. Yolanda Moses. This year's honorees include the Borough President of Manhattan, C. Virginia Fields, and the Dean of City University of New York Law School, Kirsten Booth-Glen, Esq.

Lessons Learned

The WRC staff have worked on and through many issues that contributed to accomplishing the task of revitalization. Some were easier to accomplish than others, and some obstacles eventually disappeared over time. Funding became less problematic as new program developments and collaborations relied less on the President's discretionary budget and more on the newly allowed merging of resources with student services and activities. Using Internet resources, WRC staff formed relationships and exchanged programming developments with women's centers throughout the country. In addition, WRC leaders joined national organizations such as the National Women's Studies Association and increased their engagement with the national agenda.

Service Outreach

The college views the WRC as a positive student resource that engages students in permanent, ongoing activities and counseling opportunities. By being on the campus and reaching diverse groups of women, the WRC is in a position to offer activities that allow students to develop both academically and socially. Female students of all ages, and male

who take advantage of our services, but also by the stories those students tell. When our students report that the Women's Resource Center at KCC is the one quiet space in their lives that allows them to study and learn, we know that we have created an environment in which women are encouraged and supported in their quest for success.

For questions and additional information, connect with Estelle Miller Director, Women's Resource Center, through the LeagueTLC Forum.

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